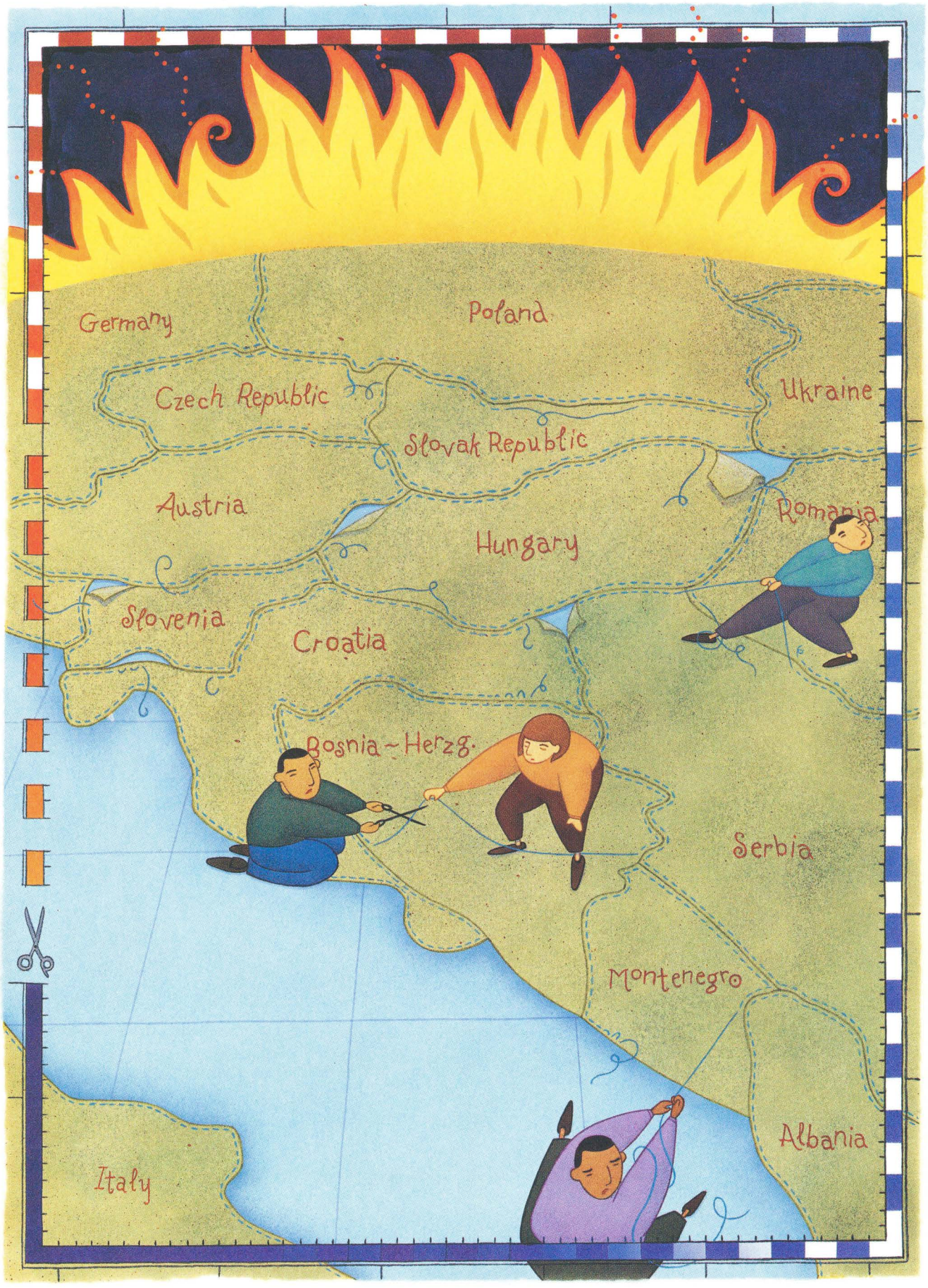
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FEATURE

A PLACE OF UNCERTAINTY

The collapse of Communism was supposed to bring freedom and happiness to the peoples of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and it may do so yet. But so far its most prominent outcome is an upsurge in nationalism, which has helped make the region

By Bob Hill

The topic at the December 10 Thursday Morning Roundtable, Syracuse University's weekly public affairs forum, was "Agony in the Balkans." The speaker was Goodwin Cooke, professor of international relations in the Maxwell School, former member of the state department, and one-time officer at the United States Embassy in Yugoslavia. Cooke had much to say on a subject in which he is considered an expert. He spoke about the causes of hatred between the main antagonists, the Serbs and Croats, the carnage prompted by the breakup of Yugoslavia, and the possible spread of violence to neighboring nations.

What he couldn't say, however, was what everyone wanted to know: what was likely to happen tomorrow and all the tomorrows after that.

Too uncertain to tell.

Too unstable to know.

Too many possibilities to fathom.

"No one really knows what's going to happen," said Cooke.

Though Cooke was speaking specifically about the Balkans, he might as well have included all of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, which has undergone a remarkable, traumatic, and often bloody transformation since the 1989 collapse of Communism.

"One thing the last couple of years has done is humble us all in terms of making predictions," says one of Cooke's Maxwell colleagues, political science professor John Nagle. "During the Cold War, it was pretty simple to make predictions because things didn't change much from year to year. Now the degree of openness in the region has shot way up. Nobody realizes that more than the people living there. Western scholars are trying to catch up with things and open their eyes to possibilities they'd rather ignore."

In little more than three years, a combination of political, ethnic, and economic forces has conspired to reshape and ravage this part of the world, where old nations have splintered, new nations have emerged, economies have seesawed, and violence has become all too common. The end of Communism opened the Iron Curtain and righted some humanitarian wrongs, but it also unleashed at least one repressed force, that of nationalism.

In Yugoslavia, the fall of Communism has resulted in the emergence of a desire to butcher chronic adversaries and rid entire regions of minority populations. The same thing is happening in many of the republics of the former Soviet Union, where faltering economies and ethnic unrest are at least partially responsible for the bloodshed in Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, and for separatist movements within Russia.

It seems apparent that the post-Cold War world is being shaped by at least two trends: the move toward uniting sovereignties into economic and political groupings, such as the 12-nation European Community; and more notably, the dividing up of states into smaller ethnic countries, some of which may be further fractured into even smaller regions composed of additional ethnic minorities. This wave of self-determination is often caused by ethnic groups rejecting the

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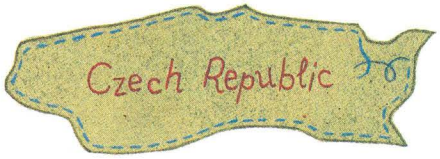
rule of multi-ethnic states, demanding and frequently receiving autonomy, and sometimes using force to achieve desired ends.

The driving force behind much of this is nationalism, which can be derived from geography, ethnicity, language, religion, or history, or combinations thereof. It may sound as if the ideals of nationalism go hand-in-hand with democracy, but it's different. In Ireland, democracy has prevailed for years, yet the island is still divided by nationalistic factions.



"It appears that humans have a need for a sense of community, a sense of being, a sense of belonging to something, which transcends some other loyalties, such as those loyalties to countries," says Cooke. "The Western ideal expressed by Thomas Jefferson is that a benign state and benevolent government can be created where people of whatever nationality can feel comfortable and live together. I still believe in that, but clearly there is a need for a community that transcends statehood. Nationalism is based on this community."

"Nationalism has always been there. It just hasn't been apparent to a lot of people," says Hodgson. "Now that these people have been given a chance to freely express themselves, their animosities, built up over years, have burst out. Some cases are just more virulent than others."

"Nationalism," says Nagle, "is one of those contenders for redefining who one is, what one speaks, and who one supports as political leaders."

There was a view for a long time that there was good nationalism and bad nationalism," says Linda Alcoff, a Syracuse University professor of philosophy. "Now the question is whether it's still possible to have good nationalism at all."

"Good" nationalism is viewed as a positive force that helps unite people in an effort to free oppressed states from imperialistic rule, she says. It began contributing to humankind's darker impulses when dictators and demagogues learned to tap it for their own means, aiding, for example, the rise of Nazism in Germany and Fascism in Italy. Nationalism appeared to fade after World War II, when much of the world settled into largely stable nations and regions. Many social scientists were moved to trumpet its death in the fifties and sixties, citing the lessening need for such movements. Today, however, its strength is as unquestioned as it is feared. It may be the most powerful and potentially dangerous movement on earth. Any doubts as to its pervasiveness have been crushed in the wake of Communism's fall in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

"In classes several years ago I remember suggesting that Communism in the Soviet Union wasn't the main thing causing people to want to separate from Russia, and I think that's become apparent," says Bill Mangin, Syracuse University professor of anthropology. "We got so tied up in the United States with everything being about Communism that we weren't able to see other forces were at work."

The enduring strength of nationalism throughout this region was clearly underestimated by many, says John Hodgson, professor of political science and recent resident of Russia. When communism fell and the grip of totalitarianism was loosened, says Hodgson, this pent-up nationalism spewed forth with unanticipated strength.

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This particular strain of nationalism has become a divisive force throughout much of Europe, says Cooke and others, where the contemporary political map doesn't necessarily correspond to the diversity of the people,

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many of whom lack a single national identity and/or live uncomfortably as minorities. No longer, it seems, are such groups content to submit to governmental rule that may not serve their interests. In Spain, the Basques and Catalans, fed up with the central government in Madrid, are seeking sovereignty. Northern Italians, supposedly disgusted with seeing their money drained off by the poorer south and political corruption in Rome, dream of autonomy. In France there's a thriving Right Wing movement that wants to cleanse the country of foreigners. In Germany, xenophobic neo-Nazis humiliate a nation by routinely assaulting and sometimes killing immigrants and minorities.

"The type of nationalism we see emerging is a type of nationalism that's not tolerant of minorities, not tolerant of political dissent, and not tolerant of those institutions that are part of a free society: parliament, free press, freedom of demonstration, and freedom of speech, all of which are required for democracy," says Nagle. "This nationalism also breeds violence."

Yugoslavia (left) captured the world's attention for two weeks in 1984, when the city of Sarajevo hosted the Olympic Games. Today, the region is again in the news, but this time for far different and mostly unfortunate reasons. Sarajevo is now part of a new nation, Bosnia and Hercegovina (right), which has been a battleground between Serbs, Croats, and Slavic Muslims since the collapse of Communism in 1989 prompted political upheaval and social unrest and resulted in the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

Nationalism is not confined to the Old World. It can also be found in such places as Canada, where the recent bid for Quebec's independence was blunted; and many developing regions, such as Africa and India, where colonial powers often created borders with no regard for ethnicity, language, or culture. Varied ethnic and religious groups fighting for turf formerly under the rule of Western empires have also contributed to the strife in Somalia and the bloodshed between Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists in India.

"Part of the reason for this wave of nationalism today is the end of the empires," says Goodwin Cooke. "The building of the great empires in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries led to the inclusion of all sorts of nationalities under governments to which they felt no loyalties. Thus, the British Empire started breaking up, forming India and Pakistan, but India itself was a British creation. It didn't exist before British rule, so it was driven by strife when the British left. The same thing happened, and is happening, elsewhere in the world."

The creation of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia combined people of different ethnicities who didn't necessarily want to be combined. People were stripped of their freedom and individuality and often forced to share homelands with age-old enemies (e.g., the Croats and Serbs in Yugoslavia). These groups often had little to call their own other than their histories and cultures. Totalitarian rule ensured they remain publicly faithful to the nation and tolerant of their neighbors.

Unshackled by the fall of Communism and struggling to cope with Western-style democracy, many ethnic groups are trying to re-establish identities and, in some cases, acquire disputed lands. This total disruption of previously existing patterns of life, says Nagle, accounts for the present surge of nationalism.

"People have been so uprooted in a sense of where they stood," says Nagle. "They're looking for something to grab onto."

Nationalism, however, isn't only about ethnicity anymore. Economics play a large role. In many cases, nationalism is similar to American politics in that everyone seems eager to blame everyone else for any existing economic problems. When your economy is suffering, says geography professor John Agnew, you often look for scapegoats to blame, and that's often the minorities and

immigrants in your country or neighboring countries.

And make no mistake, economies are suffering dearly, particularly in Eastern Europe and among the nations of the former Soviet Union. The switch from socialism to a free market economy has been more difficult than had been expected. There are housing problems, a growing crime rate, and an agricultural crisis in Russia. The soup lines are long in Lithuania, where hot water and heat are a luxury and the frustrated citizenry has voted some former Communist leaders back into power.

Many Russians blame their troubles on Russian president Boris Yeltsin, while others fault the United States. Those in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia generally blame the Russians, many of whom make up significant minorities in the Baltic States.

It seems apparent that as long as economies suffer, emotions will run high, ethnic hatred will increase, and the threat of violence will persist.

"Nationalism isn't just a symbolic phenomenon, it's also a materialistic phenomenon," says Agnew. "Serbs and Croats are not just fighting one another because they hate each other, but they're also struggling over who will get what resources and who will get access to the sea. So it's not a purely ethnic struggle. There are other dimensions to it. Ethnic cleansing is not just about getting rid of these other people, it's about taking their property, acquiring things."

ONE PROBLEM THAT DOESN'T HIT HOME

Nationalism may be flourishing in Eastern Europe, where freshly minted countries and frustrated peoples are demanding greater political and ethnic autonomy, but that doesn't mean the trend will soon show up on America's doorstep.

The United States certainly has its share of turmoil and strife, but other than a smattering of hate groups and extremists, no one is suggesting we settle our differences with a second Civil War. Certainly, the odds against the United States ever enduring a nationalistic implosion on the level of that in Eastern Europe are slim.

"We still have a lot of nationalists here, but nationalism is not just a sense of community. It is a search for political autonomy, and there's not much of that," says Goodwin Cooke, Syracuse University professor of international relations and former member of the state department. "Our nationalities are so mingled that it would be almost impossible for a group to find one area and say, 'This should be where we exercise our political autonomy.'

"Further, most people who've come to the United States have been anxious to assimilate and have sought to rid themselves of at least some of their national heritage. Certainly Italian Americans are still very proud of their heritage, but nobody is suggesting they take a hunk of territory and secede. Even African Americans, who were brought here against their will and whose sense of community is very strong, are not seeking political autonomy."

Here's what other Syracuse University experts have to say on the subject:

•Robert Jensen, dean of the graduate school and professor of Soviet geography: "There's a fundamental difference between America and what we're seeing in Eastern Europe. America was founded with the melting-pot concept, that many national and ethnic groups might come to this land under the assumption they would learn English or learn to be Americans and live in America. They might maintain some cultural identity and maybe form communities, but they would nonetheless be American.

"That's a very different concept from what we've seen in Yugoslavia or the USSR, where the state was formed with the idea that different national groups have territories or homelands that would be associated with various forms of autonomy. The Soviets argued that over time, as communism was achieved, the need for national territories would wither away, that what would remain would be an international, classless society. Clearly, that wasn't the case."

•Bill Mangin, professor of anthropology: "Nationalism is based on a combination of race, language, and culture, and the United States has probably done as good a job as any country in accommodating everyone, although it certainly doesn't look that way to us. You look at the mixture of people here and there probably could be a lot more trouble than there is."

•John Agnew, professor of geography, says if divisions were to arise within the United States, economic differences could be the reason: "In the United States, there's an increased sense that what's good for one region is not necessarily good for another. States are now competing with one another massively, often just stealing businesses for other states. A lot of the development in the south has come from attracting businesses from the north. We're not all in the same boat. States like New York are as much in competition with other states in the United States as with foreign countries." —*BH*

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The economic realities strangling many regions of the former Soviet Union may "pull the Soviet Union into some kind of new truncated federation," says Hodgson. "These nations may realize that, economically, bigger is better. Rather than having these little nations trying to go it on their own without the resources, they may try to work with the Russians. They may have to."

The United States certainly has a large stake in what happens, economically and otherwise. When there's trouble in Belgrade, Brussels, or Bonn, its reverberations are sure to be felt on Wall Street and in Washington. And right now, it's difficult to predict any reaction from the United States, other than the fact that Eastern Europe will receive constant scrutiny.

"Nationalism isn't just a symbolic phenomenon, it's also a materialistic phenomenon," says Agnew. "Serbs and Croats are not just fighting one another because they hate each other . . . Ethnic cleansing is not just about getting rid of these other people, it's about taking their property, acquiring things."

"The consequence for the U.S. is the real difficulty of plotting any form of military and political policy. It's like a cauldron: What's going to boil up next?" says Agnew. "It's very hard to establish any kinds of geopolitical priorities. There's going to be an outbreak here and an outbreak over here, and where do you intervene and where do you not intervene? How do you make a decision about which is the more serious situation?

"There's no overriding principle like there was in the Cold War, nothing to rank regions of the world in terms of their relative importance to the United States. How can you have a defense policy in that circumstance? It's very, very hard."

Although much of the former Soviet Union is currently in disarray, the United States cannot afford to gloat about its demise, says Nagle. "Militarily, Russia is still a superpower," he says. "The army may not be saddle-ready, but its missile forces are still strong. Nobody can be complacent in terms of American foreign policy about the possible coming to power of a really nationalistic Russian regime."

Nationalism is apparently here to stay. It may not always take the form of violence, but it will undoubtedly remain a powerful force, as many nations, in particular those of the former Communist Bloc, grope to gain a semblance of stability and economic success.

The grip of nationalism will eventually fade, says Syracuse University history professor Walter Ullmann, who compares its present surge to children forbidden to eat ice cream. "When the ban is finally lifted," he says, "they'll eat ice cream whether they like it or not until they reach a stage when they say, 'What the hell. I can have it any time I want, so why should I stuff myself.'

"It's the same with nationalism. When nationalism ceases to serve its purpose as an instrument to fight oppression, when its usefulness passes, it may then also pass."

Hodgson disagrees about the demise of nationalism, especially in those places awash in bloodshed.

"I don't see any resolution in the near future of the problems in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia," he says. "Once you've lost relatives and blood is shed, how do you forget? You don't really. People remember as far back as World War II. I have friends who get tense when they hear German spoken. One friend says he knows it's irrational, but he lost a brother in that war and his father became an invalid, and you don't forget that.

"I have another friend, an Armenian. He had taken one of his daughters to go shopping and came back and found that his apartment was demolished and wife and other kids were dead. He's not going to forget. He's not going to say the Azerbaijans aren't really bad guys after all. He's never going to forget." ■

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